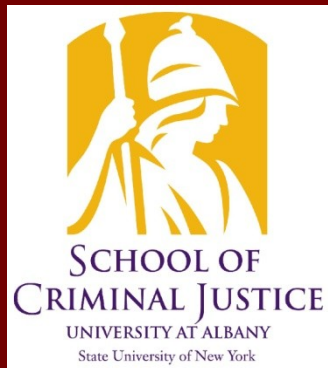


Girls in Gangs and Implications for Gender-specific Programs

Youth Violence Prevention Conference

University of Missouri-St. Louis

April 16, 2009



Dana Peterson, Ph.D.

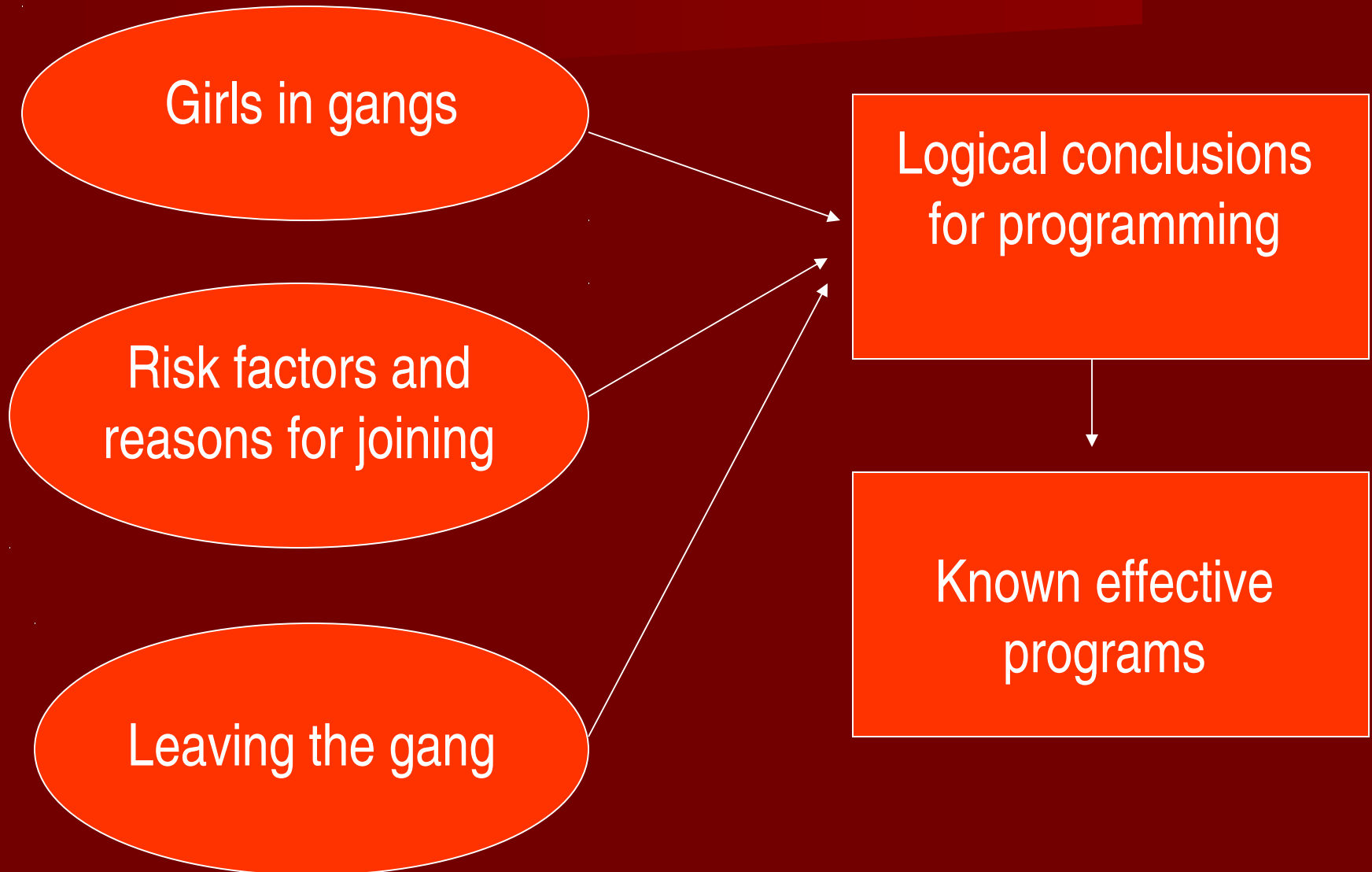
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- Photos obtained from <http://www.knowgangs.com/photo/>

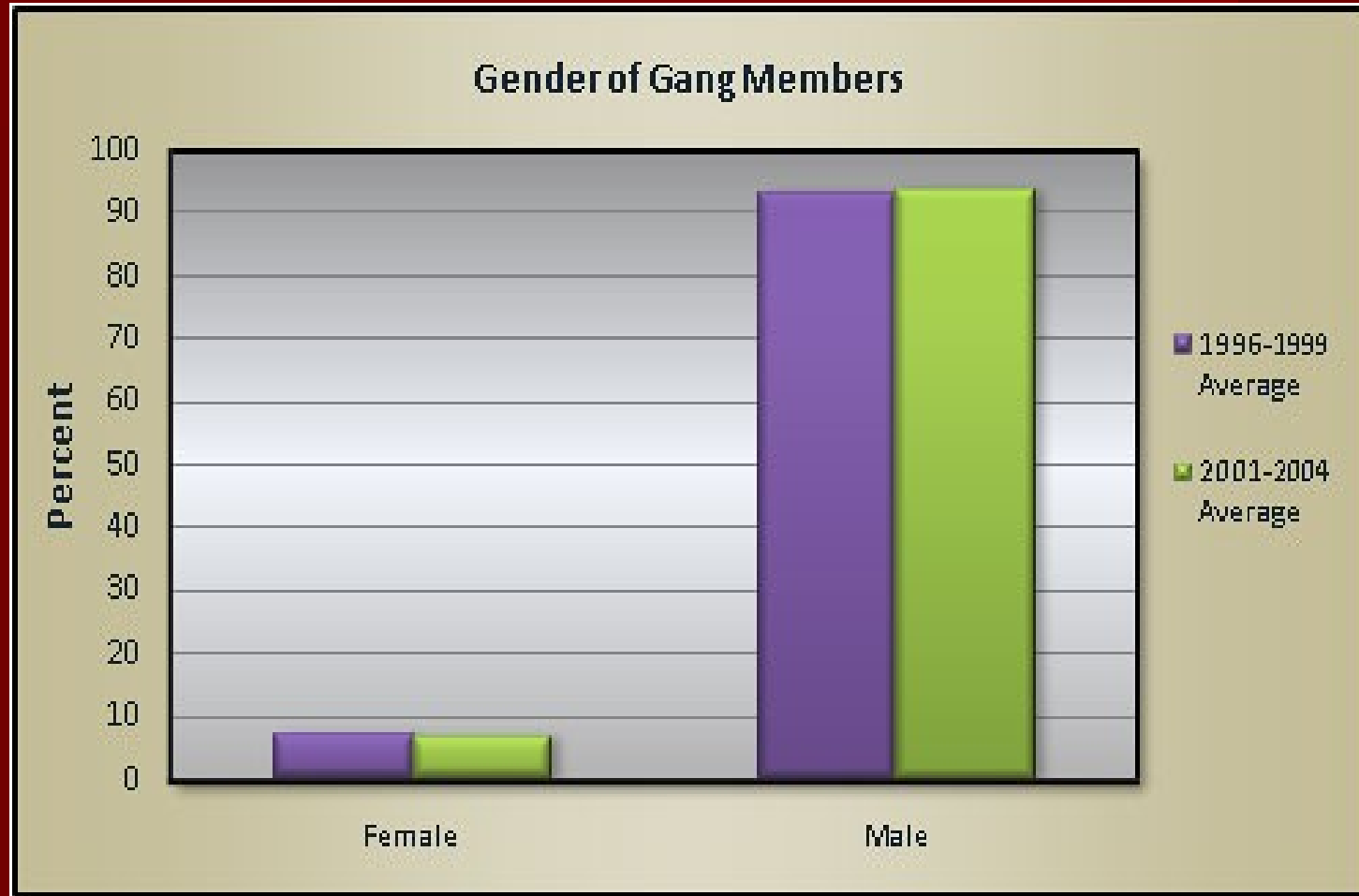
Presentation Overview



“Gangster Girls”

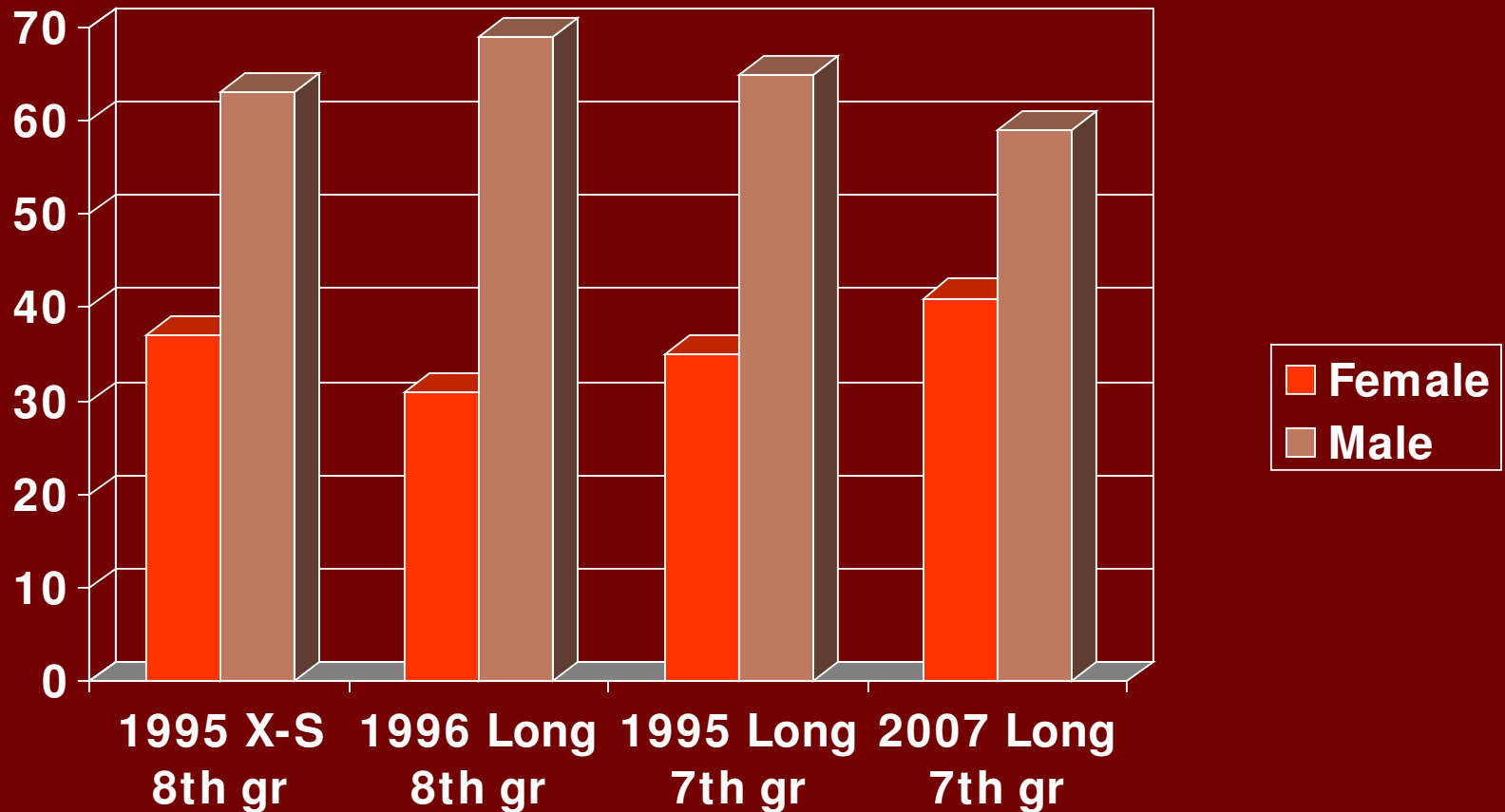
- “Mother of three dies after girl-gang attack” (May 13, 2008, www.news.com)
- “Gang of 40 girls attacks two schoolchildren on bendy bus” (June 6, 2008, Evening Standard)
- “Girls Record Brutal Attack On Teen To Allegedly Post On YouTube” (April 6, 2008, wftv.com)
- “Rival girl gangs in violent clash” (April 2, 2008, The Local)
- “Girl gangs rise as new urban vandals” (May 12, 2008)
- “**The Feral Sex: The terrifying rise of violent girl gangs**” (May 16, 2008, The Daily Mail)

Law Enforcement Agency Estimates of Female Gang Membership



Source: National Youth Gang Center (2007). *National Youth Gang Survey Analysis*.
<http://www.iir.com/nygc/nygsa/>

Female gang membership in GREAT self-report data

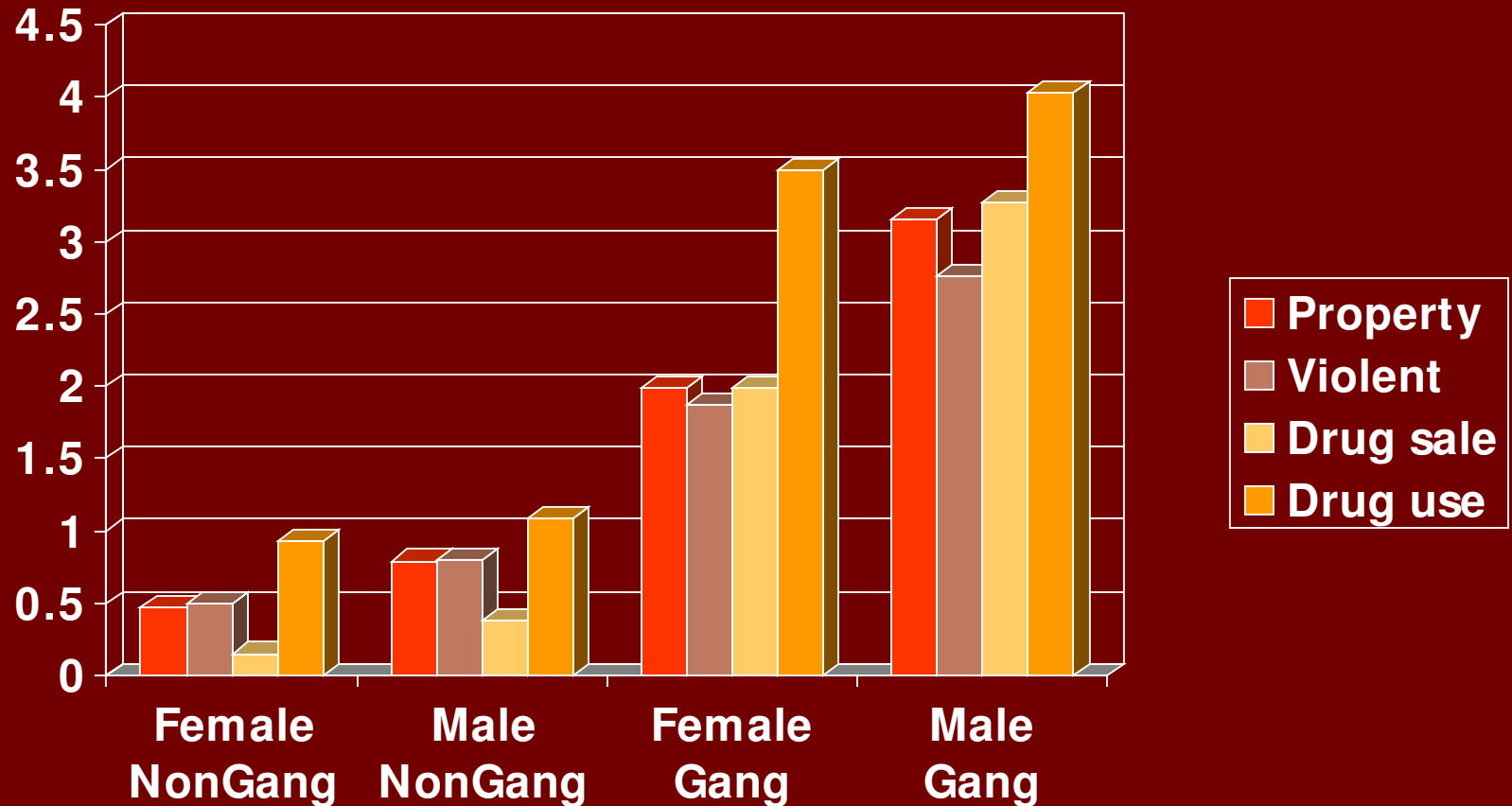


Why the difference?

- Reasons for discrepancies in sources:
 - Denial by law enforcement and/or LE policies
 - Type of activities that draw LE attention
 - Younger age of many self-report samples
 - Age of gang joining

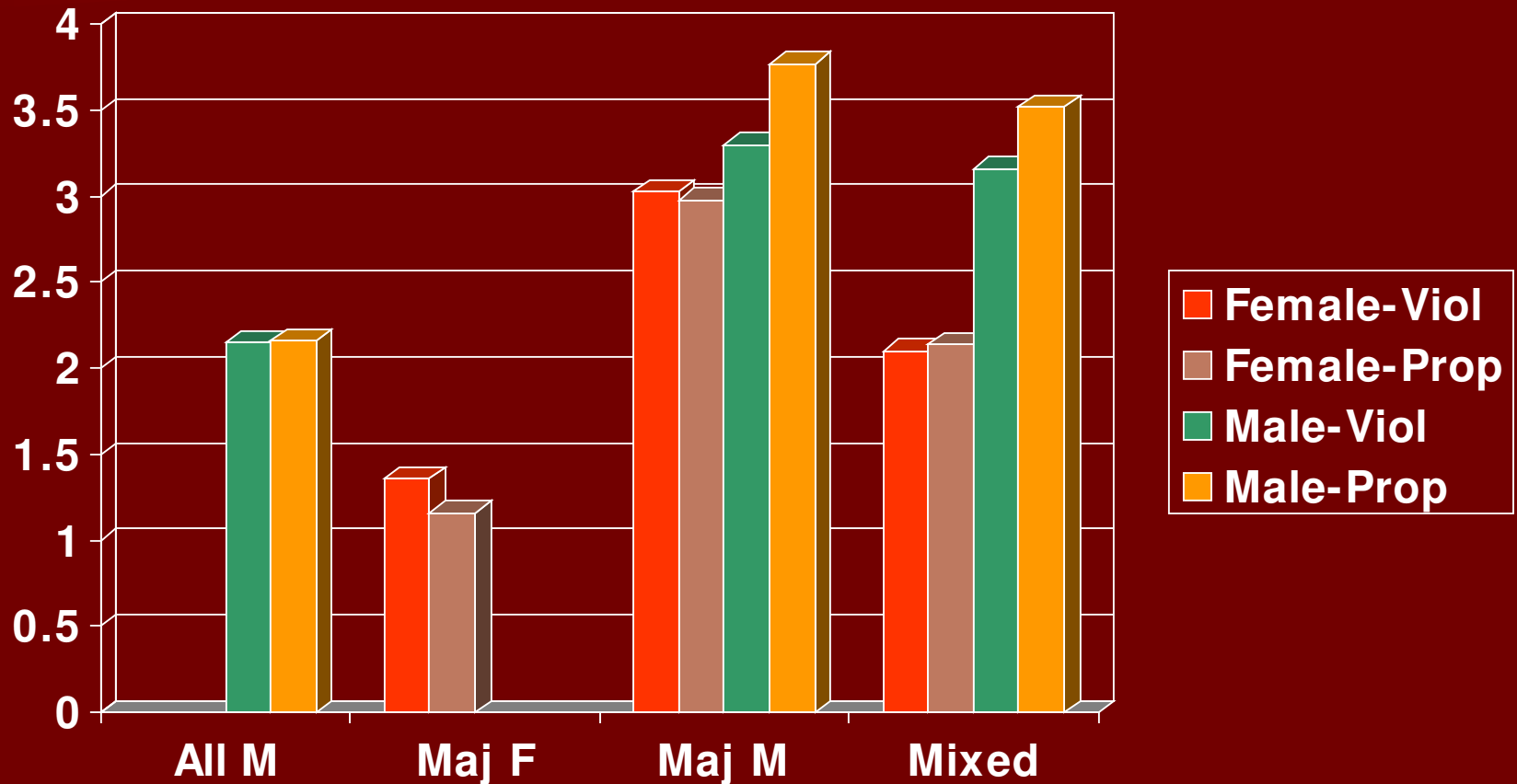
Gang Girls' Delinquency

(Deschenes & Esbensen 1999)



Offending by Sex & Gang type

(Peterson, Miller, & Esbensen, 2001)

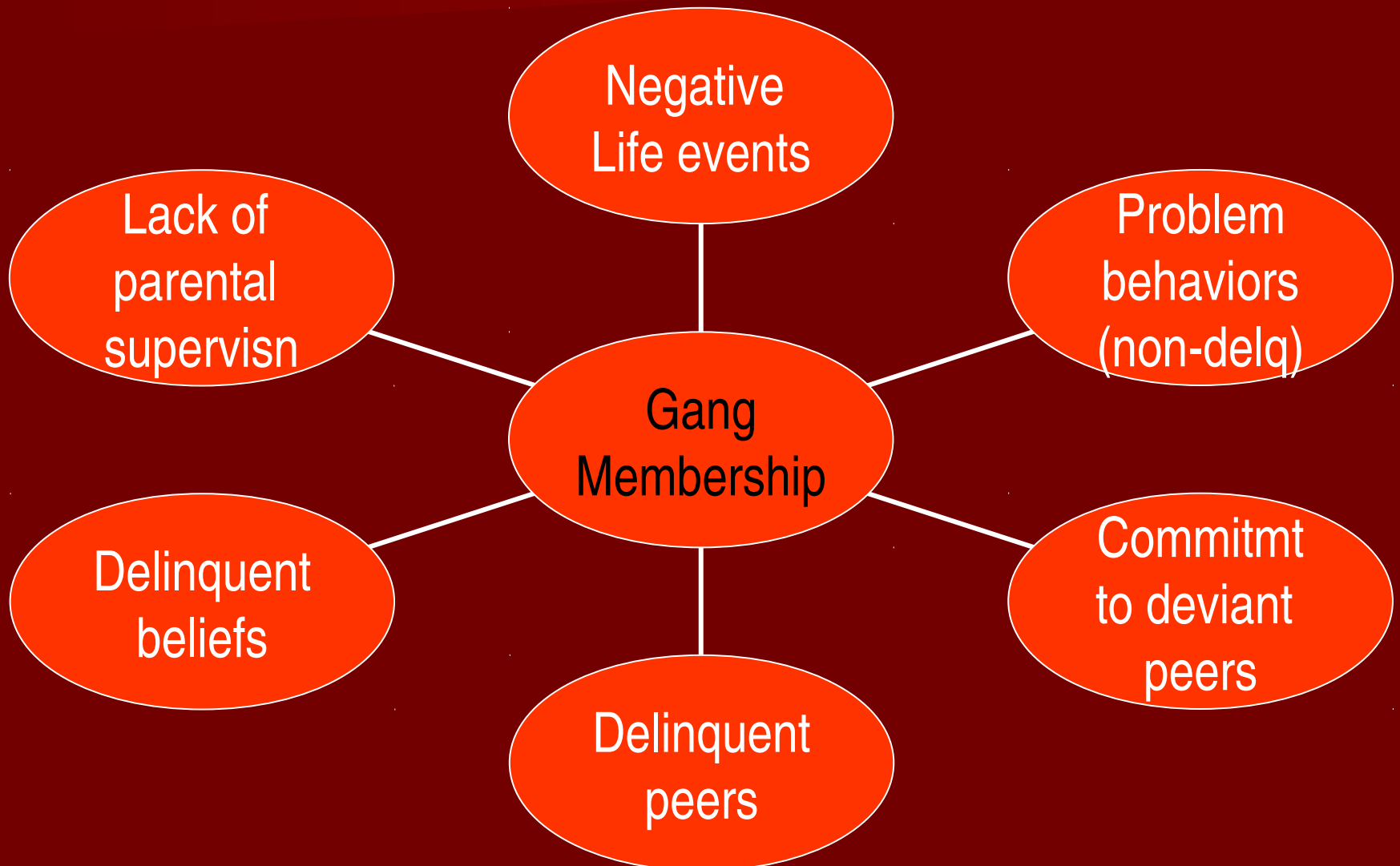


Sex Differences in Risk Factors for Gang Joining

- Not much research systematically compares females and males
 - Most risk factors are similar for girls and boys
 - Some unique factors for girls, some for boys
 - Fewer risk factors for girls than for boys
- Probably omitting important factors specific to girls

Risk Factors for Gang Membership

(Klein & Maxson '06)



Unique Risk Factors

FEMALES

MALES

Esbensen & Deschenes '98
(MV, XS, 8th gr)

Risk seeking
Low school commitment
Few prosocial peers

Lack of maternal attachment
Social isolation

Maxson & Whitlock '02 (BV, XS, 13-15)

Community sports
Receive school award
Teacher attachment

11 factors

Thornberry et al. '03
(BV, L, 15-17)

Neighborhood disorgan.
College aspirations and expectations

19 factors

GREAT II analyses
(BV, L, 7th gr)

Poor prob-solving skills

Impulsivity, risk-seeking, poor refusal skills, low empathy

Hawkins et al. '09 (Girls Study Group)
(MV, L, 8-12 gr)

Presence of caring adult
School success

Not examined

What Reasons Do Girls Give? Pushes and Pulls

- Early gang studies reveal girls joining for
 - status
 - protection
 - Fun/access to boys



Reasons for Gang Joining

	GREAT I Cross-sectional study (8 th gr) Sp95		GREAT I longitudinal study (7 th gr) Fa95		GREAT II longitudinal study (7 th gr) Fa07	
“Circle all that apply”	F	M	F	M	F	M
Fun	49	43	47	41	33	35
Protection	46	47	44	43	37	37
Friend in	50	38	53	41	33	37
Respect	42	41	41	43	27*	47
Bro/sis	20	23	34*	13	30	24
Fit in	33	28	41*	13	16	47
To get \$	27	36	13	23	18	26
Forced	8	8	13	5	2	2

What Reasons do Girls Give? Pushes and Pulls (cont'd)

(Maxson & Whitlock 2002)

FEMALES

Family involved (73%)

Friends involved (62%)

Get a reputation (58%)

MALES

Excitement (78%)

Territory/protection (71%)

Belonging (61%)

Reasons for Joining Gangs

(Thornberry et al. 2003)

“Select one”	F	M	Black	Hisp	White
Family/ friends	60	49	59	26	63
Protection	17	20	19	22	2
Fun/action	12	17	11	37	5
Other	12	13	10	15	29

No significant sex differences; Race/ethnic differences were found

What Reasons Do Girls Give? (cont'd)

■ Problems in Girls' Families

- Domestic violence
- Physical and Sexual abuse
- Neglect
- Parental substance abuse/mental health
- Family gang involvement

– Jody Miller (2001); Mark Fleisher (1998)

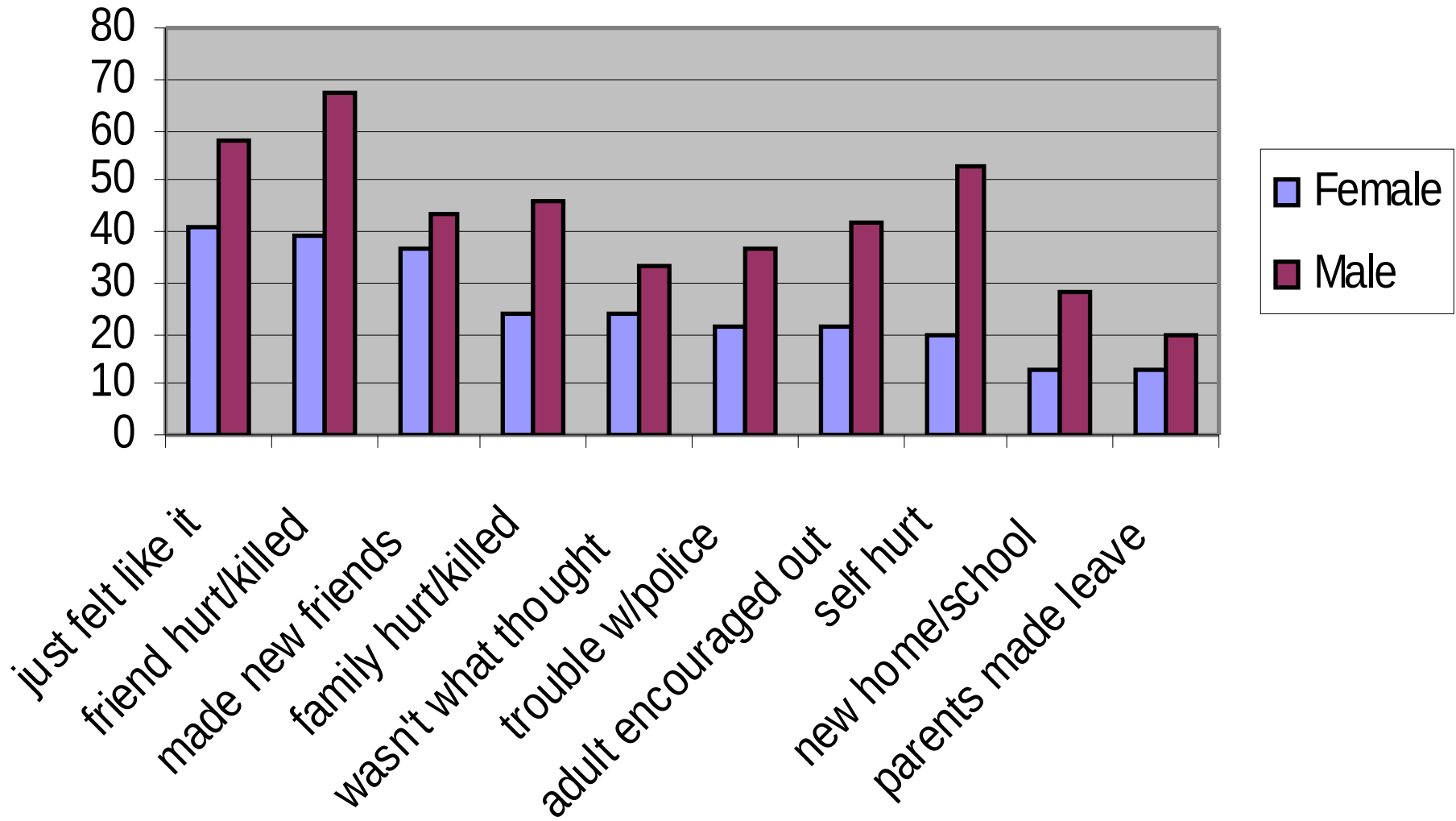
“Liberation” v. “Social injury”:

- girls find both protection and increased risk in gangs (Curry 1998; Miller 2001; Peterson, Miller, & Esbensen 2001)

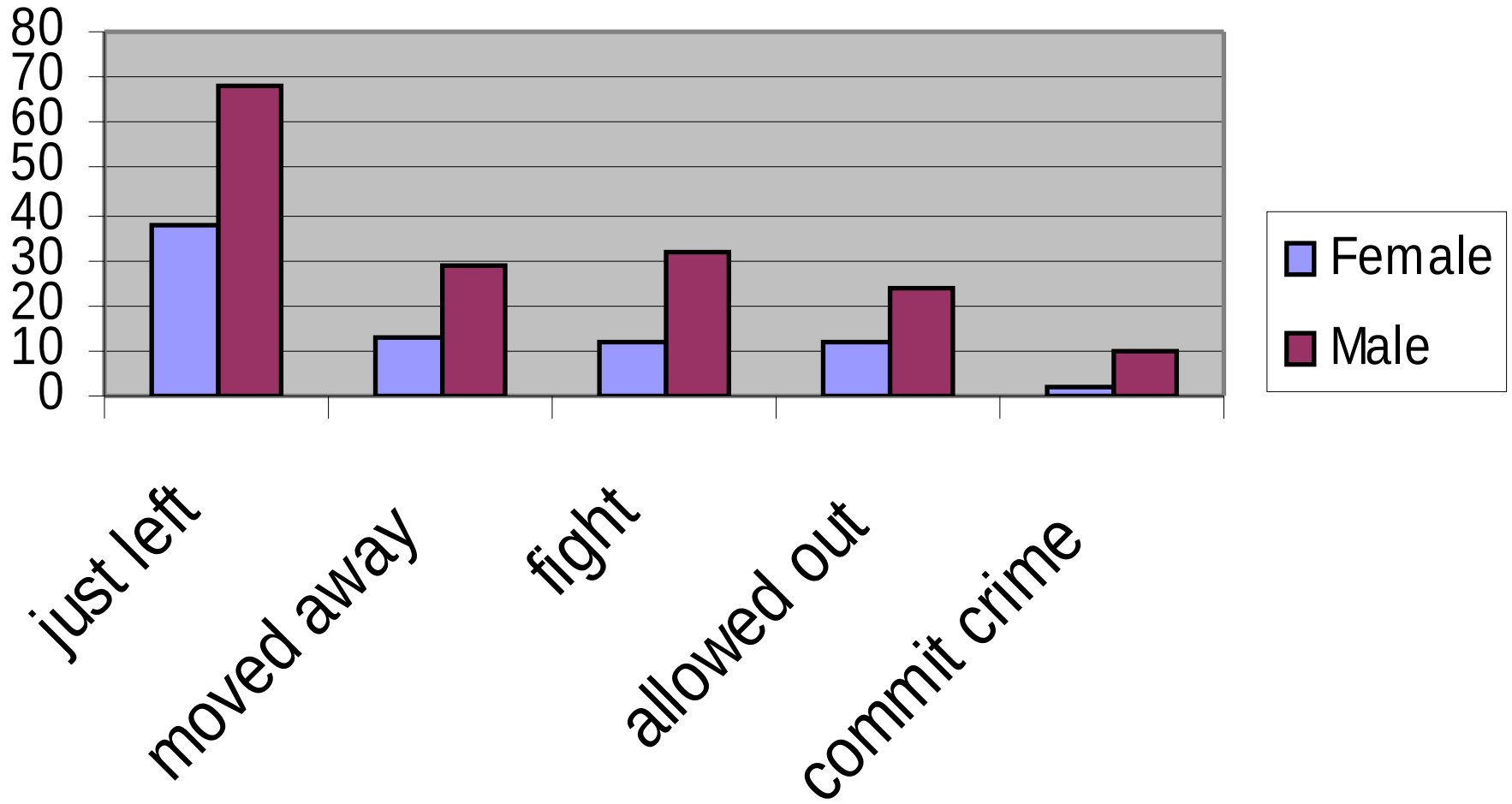
Leaving the Gang

- Gang is not (necessarily) “forever”
- Motherhood not the path for most
- Of gang females in Milwaukee (Hagedorn & Devitt):
 - 16% left due to pregnancy
 - 43.5% “just stopped”
 - 32% parents moved them to get away from gang

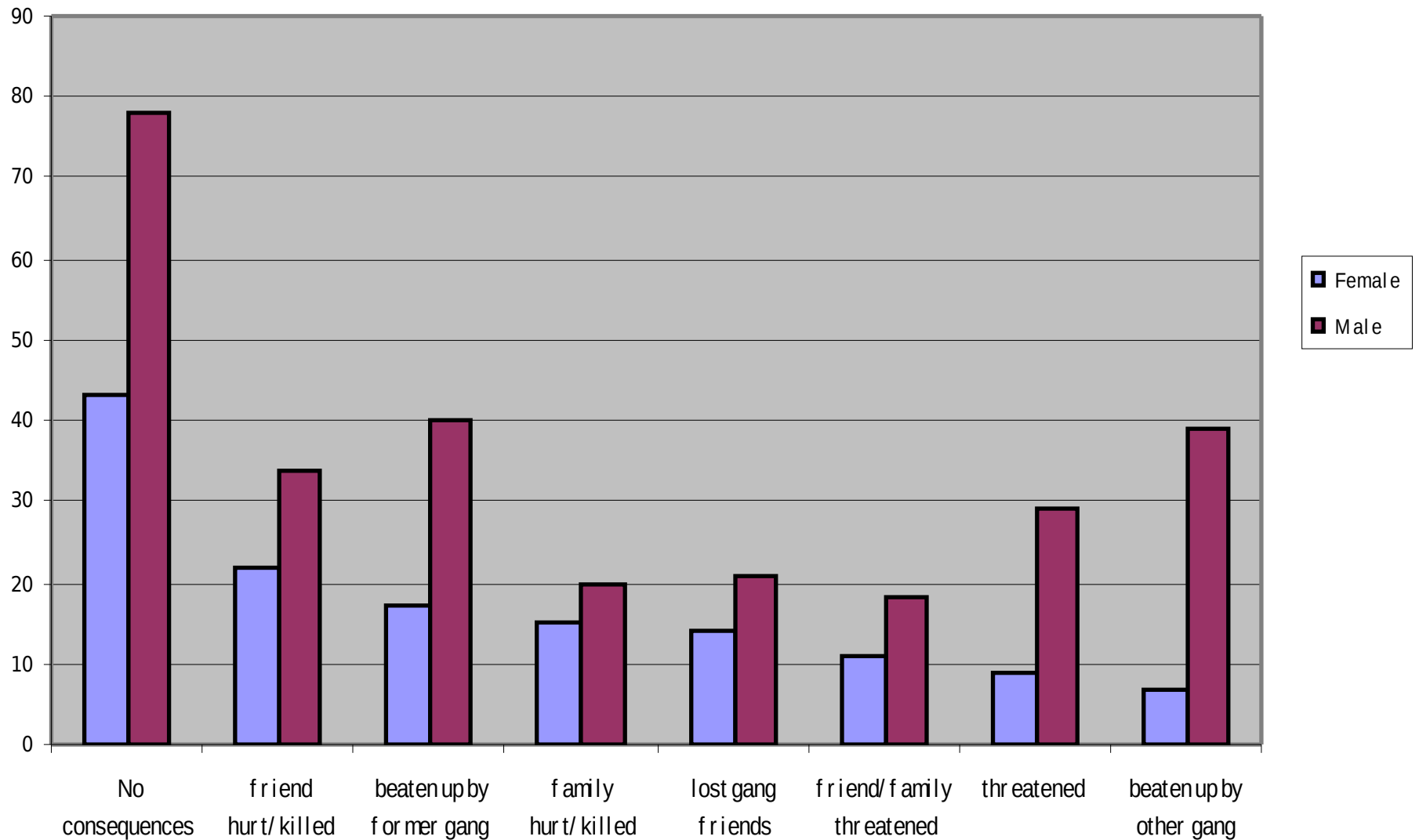
Reasons for Leaving Gang



Method of Leaving Gang



Consequences for Leaving Gang



What does all this mean for prevention & intervention?

- Must take into account:
 - Age, gang composition
 - Similarities and diffs in risk factors, reasons, and desistance
 - Other issues specific to females

Prevention/Intervention Implications: Reasons for Joining

- General prevention/intervention with sex-specific elements
- Potential prevention responses:
 - Affordable, available prosocial activities (structured, supervised)
 - Attention to bullying/violence in schools and neighborhoods
 - Making good/healthy choices about peers
 - Breaking cycle of familial gang involvement
 - Empowerment-building experiences, youth-centered communication

Prevention/Intervention Implications: Risk Factors

- Potential prevention responses:
 - Ameliorate effects of negative life events
 - Address non-delinquent problem behaviors
 - Counter delinquent beliefs
 - Peer factors: Associating with delinquent peers, attachment/commitment to deviant peers, unstructured unsupervised socializing
- Female-specific components:
 - Attention to issues of sexual abuse/assault
 - School commitment, school success, college aspiration/expectations

Strategies for Intervention

- Address gang members as individuals
- Debunk gang myths
- Potential intervention point: after violent event
- Provide:
 - Alternatives for gang activity
 - Caring adults
 - Safe environment, structure, consequences
 - Meaningful role
 - Empowerment to make decisions
 - Respect, caring, consistency

Other Issues to Consider

- Female-specific issues (see Appendix):
 - Victimization experiences (in & out of gang)
 - Relationships (with boys, girls, adults)
 - Media images & socialization
 - Mental Health/ PTSD
 - Internalizing & Externalizing Behaviors
 - Developmental Issues

- What programs fit the bill for girls?

OJJDP Girls Study Group Program Review

392 Programs nation-wide reviewed
62 Female-specific programs identified

18 of those had been evaluated

Only 1 was gang program:
Movimiento Ascendencia (Upward Movement)
(Williams, Curry & Cohen 2002)

None rated “effective” or “effective w/reservation”

Female-specific Approaches

- 3 common themes across promising programs (Zahn & Mihalic, 2008):
 - Self (Leadership & Life skills, Self-concept & Self-efficacy/empowerment, Mental health, Recreation/sports, Education)
 - Relationships (Family involvement/mother-daughter bonding, Communication skills, Relationship bldg)
 - Community (Cultural components, Community involvement/referrals/support)
- Approaches for girls should address risk factors and reasons for gang involvement, including or as well as mental health & maltreatment, family dynamics, peer group, prosocial institutions (esp school), with attention to developmental level

Concluding Thoughts

- Listen to what girls are telling us
- Addressing even a few risk factors can have modest effects on youths who experience multiple risk factors in multiple domains (cumulative disadvantage)

Keep in mind potential for “lagged effects”:

- What we do today may not = immediate results, but do not give up
- Lessons, values, skills we attempt to instill today may “take hold” and manifest years down the road

Appendix:

Girls Today

- Context:
 - Changing portrayals of women in media
 - Socialization:
 - Traditionally socialized females in caring for and serving others, putting self second
 - Some changes now: Socializing girls more like boys
- Girls often put relationships above abstract rules & regulations
 - e.g., “a young woman on probation will often violate a rule about curfew because she is ‘needed’ or even wanted by a friend, a parent, her child, or a boyfriend. In her mind, she is simply weighing the overall value of a relationship versus an abstract rule placed by someone else.” In this situation, a prob officer using a response that includes concerns about breaking rules and suffering consequences is not likely to have an impact. Instead, the officer can use his/her relationship with the girl to communicate: “I know it isn’t easy to see that curfew is important, but I have confidence in your ability to make good choices. I am depending on you and have told others I believe you can do this.’ This forces the girl into balancing one relationship over another” (Community Research Associates, 1998, p. 20).

Appendix:

Developmental Issues Specific for Females

- Relationships/communication
 - Healthy boundary-setting & assertiveness
 - Open communication & conflict resolution
- Puberty, esp early onset (emotional & psychosomatic probs, behavior outside social norms)
- Self-efficacy & self-image
 - Positive self-talk
 - Empowerment
 - Combating sexualized images, stereotypes

Appendix:

Developmental Issues Specific for Females

■ Health

- Screening for anemia, STDs, eating disorders, substance abuse, hearing/vision problems, depression, anxiety, PTSD
- Physical training and noncompetitive fitness recreation
- Discussion of pubertal changes
- Explore issues of sexuality and sexual identity
- Teach about nutrition and good personal hygiene
- Health care info and access

■ Parenting

- Birth control, pregnancy information
- Pre- and post-natal care
- Well-baby and day care
- Parenting skills training

Appendix:

Other Issues to Consider

- Life experiences:
 - Physical & especially sexual abuse
 - Witnessing conflict and violence
- Mental health problems
 - Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Internalizing reactions:
 - Depression and attempted suicide
 - Low self-esteem and poor self-image
 - Eating disorders
 - Drug abuse as escape
- Externalizing reactions:
 - Relational aggression and social manipulation
 - Physical violence

Appendix:

Issues regarding Staff

Interviewing potential staff:

- Ask questions about the applicants' interest in working with girls, experiences w/gender-specific service delivery, and their knowledge about female development.
- Listening skills are essential
- Allow youths to develop the programs and activities
- Expect to commit yourself fully to the youth, to be there for her; many youth in trouble have learned not to rely on others, especially adults, and are distrustful. Only if you show you will be there will they eventually let down their guard.
- “Commitment, caring, consistency, honesty, dependability”

Appendix:

Day-to-Day Programming

- Safe space, safe people
- Have girls-only areas available
- Have posters, books, magazines, videos, etc. that celebrate women and their achievements (in both girls and boys areas).
- Model healthy, positive gender relationships for all youth.
- When possible, run girls-only groups
 - if groups must be mixed, ensure that the number of females equals, if not exceeds, the number of males and that girls are given as much opportunity to express themselves as boys.

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